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SUBJECT: HAITI'S WEAK LEGISLATURE

REF: PAP 1425

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¶1. Summary. The Haitian parliament as of June 12 is in regular session for the first time in nearly three years. Hampered by inadequate facilities, lack of technical support, and institutional weakness, legislators have carried out their basic functions but have failed as yet to develop a legislative agenda. Parliamentary criticism of MINUSTAH's response to insecurity and President Preval's conciliatory approach to gang-leaders resonated in the media, but so far the parliament has found itself in its traditional role of supplicant to the president. End Summary.

Parliament 101

¶2. Haiti's parliament is comprised of the senate and the chamber of deputies. The senate and the chamber meet separately under the leadership of their individual executive boards, headed by their elected presidents and accompanying officers, and form their own committees. When both houses meet jointly, the body is referred to as the national assembly, and presided over by the senate president. There are 30 senators and 99 deputies. Senators are elected from 10 departments while deputies represent districts, known as circonscriptions. The senate, unlike the chamber, is permanently in session. The senators may voluntarily adjourn but not during the legislative season of the chamber, which is the second Monday of January to the second Monday in May and from the second Monday in June to the second Monday in September.

Inadequate Facilities

¶3. The "Legislative Palace" is located 150 meters across a park from the U.S. Embassy. The three story white building dates from 1946 and allegedly once served as a restaurant. The parliament building houses the national assembly gallery, used by the chamber for its sessions, the senate gallery, a small diplomatic lounge, and the administrative offices of the deputies' leadership. Though it has undergone several refurbishments, most recently immediately prior to the opening of this legislature, the building has few air

conditioners and is poorly ventilated. Cigarette smoke fills the hallways and employees are cramped, sitting two, sometimes three to a desk. The chamber employs approximately 165 staff, in offices covering public relations, security, archives, computer services, protocol, administration, and staff assistants to the members and the permanent committees.

¶4. The senate is slightly better fixed. The senate building behind the parliament has larger administrative offices and more meeting space. The Preval government has turned over two adjacent government buildings, the former labor tribunal and the former government run newspaper offices. However, these buildings require extensive repairs and will not be ready for some time. The Presidents of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies have both asked the Ambassador to donate the Chancery building, a stone's throw from the Parliament, to the legislature when we move into the NEC. Indeed, they seem to believe its a done deal.

¶5. None of the parliamentarians have individual work space or staff. All complain that they lack access to computers, printers, TVs, desks and file systems. (Note: USAID is donating surplus office equipment to the parliament, a process that had been slowed, however, by parliament's inefficient administration. End Note.) The secretary general of administrative affairs complained that parliament's existing server does not work and employees and parliamentarians alike are unable to access information. Parliamentarians demand most often that the government provide them with cars, complaining they are otherwise unable to travel back and forth to their districts.

¶6. An air of lethargy hangs over the palace on most days. Idle staffers lounge in the entry surrounded by unarmed security guards in polo shirts with embroidered &PALAIS SECURITY8 logos. Individuals seeking favors or employment

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gather outside the entry and in the adjoining park waiting to approach parliamentarians as they enter or leave. Political graffiti, including calls for Aristide,s return and support for police chief Andresol, remains spray-painted for days across the eight-foot white perimeter concrete gate.

Comment

¶7. Parliament has performed its required constitutional duties, notably confirming Prime Minister Alexis and later Police Director General Andresol, with reasonable dispatch, but has otherwise failed to develop a legislative agenda or conduct much business. Post will report septel on political trends within the parliament, but strong coalitions have yet to coalesce. With President Preval having completely removed himself from a role in the L'Espwa party, the parliament's largest bloc is leaderless and directionless. Parliamentarians have found a platform in the Haitian media, as demonstrated by the highly publicized call by some members to boycott the recent visit of UNSYG Annan and the sharp criticism by others of President Preval's policy of dialogue with Port-au-Prince's criminal gangs (reftel). Media coverage of the disparate views within parliament does serve as a useful gauge of overall public opinion. The overall track record so far, however, indicates that parliament will in the near-term continue to play its traditional role of the weak second branch beholden to the executive.
SANDERSON